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Introduction - Space, power and sexuality: Transgressive and transformative possibilities at the interstices of spatial boundaries

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Space, power and sexuality: Transgressive and transformative possibilities at the interstices of spatial boundaries

Abstract

The themed section consists of articles that explore the relationship between power and space in relation to gender and sexuality by looking at processes of transgression, subversion or expansion of normative spatial practices and narratives. Using a theoretical framework that draws out power and space within a more specific context of feminist and queer literature, the articles explore the possibility to transgress, subvert or expand norms at the interstices of spatial boundaries beyond traditional binaries and hierarchies. Collectively, the articles call for a continued theoretical and methodological focus into the importance of looking at everyday sites of struggles and resistance in the crevasses, the liminal zones of space. The transgression of spatialized norms of sexuality and gender present a transformative potential that should be recognized for its political significance but, we argue, with caution as heteronormative and heteropatriarchal norms too often remain *de rigueur* in a neoliberal context.

Keywords: Power; norms; sexuality; space; transgression

Introduction

Since we began working on this special issue in 2016, a lot has happened in the world that makes the topics explored in the four articles presented here even more salient to feminist geography. The rapid and frightening changes to the political landscape makes clear the need to bring together articles that explore questions of space, power and transgression/subversion in relation to gender and sexuality. Indeed, we are observing in the US and much of Western Europe a shift in the political spectrum that is increasingly skewed towards neoliberal and conservative ideologies that contribute to the exclusion of Other in many guises; these Others that do not conform to heteropatriarchal norms are increasingly singled out and positioned as a challenge to

the existing masculine and heteronormative social order. These political changes are deeply troubling as polarizations appear to be growing as a result of socio-political shifts. This also appears to be, perhaps paradoxically, a consequence of ideological boundaries being increasingly blurred and redrawn. In this context, the question of gender and sexuality takes a new prominence especially if we think of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy as two complementary processes of oppression. Forms of resistance and contestations have however found ways to continue to express themselves - sometimes with dramatic effects.

On the 21 January 2017, millions of women marched in cities across the world to protest and rally against the political order (Moss and Maddrell, 2017). For a day at least, women were able to reclaim the streets of cities on a global scale as a space of resistance and solidarity (Falola and West Ohueri, 2017). In the virtual space of the twitter-sphere, the #metoo and #timesup movements emerged as a response to the Weinstein affair and other cases involving powerful figures of the entertainment industry. These public revelations not only revealed the scale of sexual harassment in Hollywood, they also began to shed some light on a more widespread issue affecting women in the everyday places and spaces of the worlds in which they work, live, inhabit. These two examples of contestation have not been all-encompassing and a number of voices remain unheard as there are other class and race-based power relations in the experience of gender and sexuality that are not represented (or perhaps, more accurately, are silenced) in the current atmosphere of feminist anger (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2017). The question of non-heteronormative people's experience of violence in different forms and in different public and private areas of their lives also remains less prominent in these contestations. However, these examples, which are to be considered for their geographical and spatial dimension as

much as the fact that they are a question of time, history and genealogy, make clear the importance of trying to make sense of the relationship between power and space in order to understand the normalizing and constraining effect of *power over space* and how this hegemony might best be challenged.

As such in this introduction, we explore conceptualization of space and power and the particular question of transgression; the articles in this special issue speak particularly to transgression/ subversion and the disruption of the ‘order of things’. Taken together, these four articles allow us to make an argument for the importance of looking at everyday sites of struggles and resistance in the crevasses, the liminal zones and the interstices of space.

Conceptualizing Space and Power

Space, as Certeau (1984) puts it, ‘occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities’ (Certeau 1984, 117). In defining space as the result of an interaction of power-loaded matrices and trajectories, Certeau (1984) identifies forms of subversion to the established order and innovatively demonstrates the possibility of circumventing the formulaic quality of ‘ways of operating’ in space through alternative and subversive ‘ways of using’ and what he refers to as ‘tactics’. His argument on spatial practices offers an analysis of everyday negotiations of place using walking in the city as an example of the ways in which place can be appropriated beyond the ‘the “geometrical” or “geographical space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions’ (1984, 93). This conceptualisation conveys the saliency of agentic forms of transgression or subversion in space.

Before Certeau, Foucault who conceptualised power as ubiquitous, pervasive and capable of taking different forms in different spaces (as for instance biopower, disciplinary power, pastoral power, and psychiatric power), including through embodiment, also envisaged the possibility to go against norms and the extent to which this can be possible (see, for instance, Foucault 1976, 2001). Foucault's work has notably been embraced by some geographers (Philo 2011, Howell 2007). Philo (2011) calls for a re-reading of Foucault, particularly specific aspects of his latest published works (for e.g. the *Collège de France* lectures), which confer an engagement with space, spatial relations and power that, he considers, should be of particular interest to geographers. Philo (1991) had already advanced the idea of a 'Foucault's geography' as a '“truly” postmodern human geography' (Philo 1991, 137) especially in the 'taking seriously of space, place and geography as sources of fragmentation' (Philo 1991, 144). The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia for instance has been used to explore hidden and marginalised spaces of difference: see Lee (2009) on the blurring of boundaries between war and domesticity; Bailey and Shabazz's themed issue on 'Gender and sexual geographies of blackness' (2014) expanding Foucault's theory of heterotopias 'to consider the ways in which heterotopic spaces are simultaneously racialized, gendered, and sexualized' (Bailey and Shabazz 2014, 317); and in this issue, Neville (2018) reads online slash communities as heterotopias as safe counter-sites.

At the juncture of power relations, spaces of resistance can indeed be formed even if 'actual resistance is not inevitable and might be relatively scarce' (Ettlinger 2011, 549). Different people or different groups of people find alternatives in the nexus of power relations and 'power-geometries' (Massey 2005) that constitute space. They find or create alternative places to be, or alternative ways of being in place, and

in finding a place or space to define themselves, they are at times able to challenge prescribed identities. These theoretical frameworks also highlight the capability for agency to express itself through choice and creativity in practices and processes of meaning-making - ultimately with the effect to rethink spatial practices and meanings. We, and the authors of the articles in this themed section, retain the everyday quality of forms of transgression or subversion in space, by empirically considering spatial practices and processes of meaning-making that have the potential to form a collective set of resistance to prescribed notions and spatial organizations and productions of gender and sexuality in line with feminist geographers who have pursued a critical reading of space that incorporate a focus on gender and sexuality.

Critically Reading Space through Gender and Sexuality: transgressive and transformative possibilities at the interstice

Gender and sexual subjectivities, in particular, are often determined by the inequality imbued in the power-geometries of space or what Cresswell (2010) calls the '(...) systematically asymmetrical arrangement of power' (Cresswell 2010, 172). The spatialization of gender and sexuality constitutes a central turn as it recognises variations in the ways in which gender and sexuality can be expressed and lived in different spaces and places. Speaking about the importance of politics in relation to sexual identities and spaces, Brown, Browne and Lim argue that:

power might be understood as myriad entanglements of resistance and domination that are mutually constitutive of each other. Power operates through how we interact with one another, how we regulate each other's behavior and consequently make the spaces that we inhabit (2007, 5).

The disciplining imperatives of power relations often serve to normalize, at the expense of others, some sexual and gendered identities as well as their expression and

movement in space. Each article in this issue engages with different forms of contestation and disruption of spatial norms, their binaries and hierarchies understanding power as both a source of resistance and domination, and considering its inclusion in geographical understandings of the politics of space and place (see Ahmed 2006, Curren 2005). Indeed, the articles illustrate the political nature of particular places (real or imagined, physical or virtual) and the ways traditional power structures and relations are disrupted in the wake of transgressive sexed/gendered practices as well as meaning-making processes. This necessitates both a material understanding of spatial divisions, but also a consideration of how ontological or emotional transgressions impact people moving in and through particular spaces and places.

The strength of feminist and queer theory has been to engage in the disruption of hegemonic structures of power relations that govern identities and their embodiment by highlighting the narratives and practices that contest or extend the norm (Oswin 2008). Baydar (2012) speaks for instance of the alteration of normative spatial practices in the sexualized production of space. One of the effects of power over space is in the production and maintenance of norms that are defined in binary terms. The feminist and queer geography literature has instead informed a non-binary approach to a critical reading of sexuality and gender conceptualizing space as fluid and not fixed. Doan (2010) for instance identifies what she calls 'the tyranny of gendered spaces'. For Doan (2010) this tyranny is characterized by a persisting gendered dichotomy that constrains the expression and experience of gendered differences in space. Interrogating and in turn challenging the tyranny of gender categories and their spatial correspondence present a transformative potential. Doan (2010) makes a pertinent argument in relation to intersexed and transgendered

populations and how this tyranny affects both their private and public life albeit in different ways. Focusing on heterosexuality and the moral geographies of prostitution, Hubbard (2000) highlights a binary between ‘moral and immoral heterosexual identities’. Oswin (2008) takes the argument further. Although a ‘scholarship on queer geographies has called attention to the active production of space as heterosexualized and has levelled powerful critiques at the implicit heterosexual bias of much geographical theorizing’ (Oswin 2008, 89), she argues that a queer geographical approach should adopt a broader scope that considers ‘such issues as transnational labour flows, diaspora, immigration, public health, globalization, domesticity, geopolitics and poverty’ and as such ‘demonstrates the use of queer theory to these central concerns of critical geography far beyond analysis of their relationship to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered lives’ (Oswin 2008, 100).

We contend that this research agenda remains important and this themed issue is situated within literature from feminist and queer geographers that have engaged with gender and sexual binaries at the intersection of different social factors in a number of socio-spatial contexts and empirical settings. As examples, we can cite the work of Podmore (2001) using Montreal’s Boul. St Laurent to dismiss a heterosexual and homosexual binary in the way the city is experienced by Lesbians; Little (2002) and Little and Panelli (2003) on rural gender identity and the importance of critically addressing hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity; Bailey (2014) on the Black LGBT Ballroom community and the ‘spatial practice of possibility’ in urban Detroit.

In the context of the neo-liberal city, gentrification imposes a particular set of power relations at the intersection of class, gender and sexuality (Kern 2010a, 2010b). This themed issue begins with Buckingham, Degen and Marandet’s article situated in

the context of 'large-scale gentrification and neoliberalisation, which leaves fewer interstitial places available for non-conforming populations, and the organisation which supports them' (Buckingham, Degen and Marandet 2017, 14). Their article contends a strong relationship between spatial practices of subversion, transformation of space and the self or sense of self. In this Buckingham, Degen and Marandet (2017) further demonstrate the importance of place and how it is possible to carve out a space of opportunity through co-creation. In order to understand the relationship between place and sex work they look at 'The Quotidian' and 'the Gentrified' in two areas of London undergoing gentrification: Tower Hamlets and Kings Cross. With this distinction, Buckingham et al. (2017) offer an alternative and feminist reading of street-sex work that pay particular attention the 'lived body' in 'lived spaces' as well as the possibility for different forms of identification and ways of being women in terms not simply defined by their sex work.

In another part of London where hegemonic processes (Sanders-McDonagh et al, 2016) of gentrification are also narrowing down the possibilities for queer geographies of sexuality, Sanders-McDonagh and Peyrefitte's (2018) contribution focuses on two sex shops in Soho (London). One of the effects of this hegemonic gentrification is the sanitization of the area by eliminating or displacing practices that do not conform to a respectable norm in this case especially in relation to sexuality. These two shops however cater for a wide range of sexual practices and orientations and thus present examples of the ways in 'which sex shops in this part of London have moved away from being masculine, seedy spaces, to places where queer possibilities emerge for a wide range of people seeking out sexual retailing' (Sanders-McDonagh and Peyrefitte, 2018). Their existence and the queer possibility that they therefore represent notably through their co-location and 'the attendant history of the

area' contest the organization of public space along heteronormative but also homonormative lines (Podmore 2013).

By way of counteracting another form of spatial marginalization in a different urban and national context, La Fundacion 26 de Diciembre (in Madrid, Spain) opened up to specifically support older LGBT people (Weicht and Radicioni 2017).

Exploring the gendered/sexed practices of its residents, Weicht and Radicioni argue that the social centre and its accompanying initiatives provide a space which represents the past and present struggles for the recognition of rights, the caring relationships and the histories with which these groups identify. The article thus focuses on the transformative power of the active and collective making of caring spaces through which narratives of care, collective sexual and gender recognition and practices of love/friendship caring relationships can replace both traditional/informal forms of living together and caring and institutional spaces that provide professional care. The work of Weicht and Radicioni provide a fascinating insight into the ways in which 'bodies out of place' can find a place of inhabitation where they can be expanded to use Ahmed's expression (Ahmed 2006, 11).

As another example of alternative spaces where norms are contested, Neville's article on gendered and sexed identities draws on large-scale survey data from women who write gay male erotica and pornography to suggest that particular virtual spaces are safe spaces. For her participants, online slash communities offer women a chance to explore their own gender and sexuality, and as a result they are able to challenge heteronormativity and gender conformity. However, Neville's study demonstrates that m/m online fandoms are not only providing safe online spaces but can also constitute real spaces as heterotopias where 'alternative identities can be reflected and where subordinated groups can find support and collective resistance (Warner 1999, Fraser

1992)’ (Neville 2018). In looking at the relationship between virtual and real-life spaces, Neville is able to uncover the different significations of slash such as being a gateway to activism, a medium for knowledge building and a place for personal discovery. Her analysis of these dimensions shows that ‘there is a rejection of overly-rigid policing of the boundaries of these spaces, and an enthusiasm for the idea of them as heterotopias, counterpublics, spaces that are radical and have the potential to be genuinely transformative’ (Neville 2018).

Conclusion

In recognizing the interstices that constitute space in its diversity, the different articles in this special section expand scholarly knowledge – theoretical, methodological and empirical – that disrupts conceptualizations of space. Beside a gendered and feminist theoretical and conceptual lens, the articles in this special issue indeed display a range of methodological approaches showing the diversity and the creativity of a scholarship that explore the interstices of power relations in space. In doing so, the collection presents examples of different ways in which space and place can be understood and conceptualized through practices but also processes of meaning-making allowing for the shifting of normative boundaries – geographies of sexuality that are not determined by what Brown et al. (2007) have warned as ‘the theoretical orthodoxy’ of queer theorizing. As such, a critical geography of space and place should recognize the porosity and the malleability of borders around places as they are being drawn and redrawn by the power-relations that constitute space.

This themed issue present different examples of the possibility to carve out a space of transgression of heteronormative/homonormative and heteropatriarchal structures, whether it is in the everyday spaces of the queer care home, through

support services, in sex shops or in online slash communities. The articles overall offer an empirically grounded insight into the possibilities to subvert, transgress and transform spaces by investigating different cases of sexed and gendered narratives and practices in a variety of contexts. They offer an invitation to continue turning our academic lens at the liminal zones, the interstices or crevasses of space: the spaces that are carved out outside the norm. The interstices in some contexts are becoming narrower and this is most potent in Buckingham, Degen and Marandet's (2017) and Sanders-McDonagh and Peyrefitte's (2018) articles which deal with the effect of gentrification in the neoliberal city. In Weicht and Radicioni's (2017) and Neville's (2018) articles, the interstices remain 'marginal' but a real alternative space of expression and transformation. In all cases, the articles demonstrate the transformative possibility of transgression. As Moss and Dyck (2003: 67) argue:

Transgression may be contested, as in the use of threat and violence, or alternatively through self-surveillance in fear or acceptance of dominant norms. If 'successful', transgression as a transformative politics adding to the multiplicity of meanings of a particular place.

We can question the extent to which the gendered and sexed practices and narratives that carve out transformative spaces have enough political weight in their transgression. In the current political context, this special issue presents, with a degree of optimism, alternative voices that contest the neoliberal and heteropatriarchal consensuses that spatially govern people's lives and bodies. Conversely, we contend that their transformative political strength lies in the recognition of their existence and this recognition should continue to inform a research agenda in critical geography.

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